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- Home
- About
- Disclaimer
- Navy Medicine News
- Navy Medicine WebSite
-

Written on DECEMBER 1, 2014 AT 6:00 AM by SVANDERWERFF

Backyard Bugs to Global Health: Curiosity Leads to Rewarding Navy Career

Filed under HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF, MILITARY MEDICINE, OPERATIONS (NO COMMENTS)

By Lt. Cmdr. James C. Dunford, Ph.D., Medical Entomologist, Navy Environmental and Preventive Medicine Unit 2



There are approximately 35 Navy Entomologists located throughout the world.

Many professional entomologists have a similar story: we were all fascinated by creepy crawlies when we were young and the curiosity never went away.

While that is basically my story, I never envisioned where that curiosity would take me and how it might affect public health on a global scale. Most civilians and active duty personnel that know what I do for a living are surprised that the Navy has entomologists, and in fact there are approximately 35 of us located throughout the world.

My Navy story began at the University of Florida where I was working on a Ph.D. in Entomology and Nematology (i.e., worms). While attending UF, I taught courses on insect identification and had the unique opportunity to meet and get to know my future Navy entomology mentors as

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January 2015 (5)

December 2014 (17)

November 2014 (11)

October 2014 (15)



What are the odds that three newly commissioned officers, all with Master’s degrees in Entomology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, get stationed at the same unit at the same time and all serve simultaneously in Afghanistan?

students in my classes. At the time, I too was unaware the Navy had entomologists, but I was soon captivated by the idea of using my entomology training for a greater cause. I eventually became recipient of the Navy’s Health Care Collegiate Scholarship in 2004, and was commissioned as an officer in the Medical Service Corps in 2007.

To date, I have been stationed at the Navy Entomology Center of Excellence, the ‘mother ship’ of Navy Entomology and a unique Department of Defense asset capable of testing and evaluating products, equipment and surveillance methodologies that become the cutting edge technologies for protecting the deployed war-fighter against insect-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue, and leishmaniasis. It was there that I learned not only what it means to be an entomologist in the Navy, but what it means to be a Naval officer. I also learned how special circumstances afforded by the Navy can develop life-long friendships. What are the odds that three newly commissioned officers, all with Master’s degrees in Entomology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, get stationed at the same unit at the same time and all serve simultaneously in Afghanistan? Bucky Badger would be proud!

I have also been stationed at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta (the Navy has two entomology billets there), where I had the chance to work alongside some of the world’s foremost experts in public health entomology. Our collaborations have resulted in several publications, and in 2012 I was presented the Excellence in Partnering Award from the CDC’s Center for Global Health. <http://www.entsoc.org/member-news/james-dunford-receives-global-health-honor-award>.



The FDPMU is comprised of a number of environmental specialties that stand ready to deploy to provide critical force health protection and public health expertise

I am currently stationed at Navy Environmental and Preventive Medicine Unit 2 in Norfolk, where I have the rare opportunity to work with a number of Navy medical specialties, such as preventive medicine officers, environmental health officers, microbiologists, and biochemists to name a few. I am also a member of one of the Navy’s most versatile assets, the Forward Deployable Preventive Medicine Unit. The FDPMU is comprised of a number of environmental

September 2014 (20)

August 2014 (14)

July 2014 (13)

June 2014 (8)

May 2014 (11)

April 2014 (9)

March 2014 (14)

February 2014 (7)

January 2014 (7)

December 2013 (7)

November 2013 (12)

October 2013 (7)

September 2013 (14)

August 2013 (13)

July 2013 (11)

June 2013 (22)

May 2013 (15)

April 2013 (14)

March 2013 (14)

February 2013 (14)

January 2013 (12)

December 2012 (11)

November 2012 (11)

October 2012 (7)

September 2012 (9)

August 2012 (12)

July 2012 (13)

June 2012 (17)

May 2012 (22)

April 2012 (14)

March 2012 (13)

February 2012 (14)

January 2012 (13)

during humanitarian missions

specialties that stand ready to deploy to provide critical force health protection and public

health expertise during humanitarian missions. The team recently returned from the international joint training exercise Bold Alligator, which took place along much of the eastern U.S. seaboard.

My Navy career to date has included travel to number of exotic locations and rewarding collaborations with international and national agencies such as the World Health Organization, CDC, United States Department of Agriculture, and a number of universities and private industries, with the ultimate goals of protecting the war-fighter and improving public health. NEPMU-2 OIC, CDR Jennifer Espiritu, M.D. supports these on-going collaborations and encourages establishing new ones, expanding NEPMU-2’s global public health role and showcasing Navy Medicine’s capabilities. I’ve come a long way from the curious backyard entomologist, and what an incredible entomological journey it has been.

For more on Navy entomology, please contact LCDR Dunford: james.dunford@med.navy.mil

December 2011 (13)
November 2011 (20)
October 2011 (22)
September 2011 (12)
August 2011 (16)
July 2011 (10)

← Next post

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